

## **Principles of Proper Bible Interpretation**

Skeptics have often asked, "If the Bible is God's Word, why are there so many different interpretations of what He supposedly said?"

Those who accept the Bible as the Word of God believe that God has spoken to us unambiguously.

We believe that there is only one "*right interpretation*" of any given Biblical passage - the meaning God intended when He "breathed" His word into the human author.

If this view is correct, and we believe that it is; It follows that of the many "*different interpretations*" skeptics refer to, there must be only one that is valid. That is, while a particular passage may have many applications, it must have only one meaning - the one the author through inspiration of the Holy Spirit intended.

## **Hermeneutics**

How, then may we determine the proper interpretation of Scripture?

The science of Biblical Hermeneutics - in all it's varied "schools" - seeks to provide a methodology to answer that question.

Biblical hermeneutics is the science that teaches the principles and methods of interpreting the Word of God.

Proper hermeneutics provide us tools to help ensure that we are basing our interpretations on the truth as God has revealed it, while avoiding error to the greatest degree possible.

Using sound hermeneutic principles is not optional for the true disciple of Christ. The Apostle Paul encourages us to "be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth". **(2 Timothy 2:15)**.

## **Some Definitions:**

**Revelation** The act of God the Holy Spirit unveiling or uncovering truths that man through his own intellect, reason, and investigation cannot discover for himself.

**Inspiration** The act of the Holy Spirit superintending the writing of the truths that God wants man to know. I use the term "superintending" to indicate that God uses the personality, experience, vocabulary, and writing style of the author. Inspiration is divine guidance, not dictation. By superintending the Biblical authors, God ensures that His revelation is recorded accurately and without error.

**Illumination** The act of the Holy Spirit to convict the reader of the truth of Scripture and lead the reader to an "extra-exegetical" understanding of the general truth of God's Word.. By "extra-exegetical," I don't mean to imply that the Holy Spirit is not involved in the process of exegesis (the interpretation of a given passage), but that illumination is properly understood to be an aspect of the convicting role of the Spirit, to soften the heart. God speaks to us through His written Word. The Holy Spirit helps us to know that what we are reading is indeed God's Word.

**Interpretation** The prayerful application of Scriptural principles by which the illuminated student of God's Word comes to an understanding of Scripture that corresponds as closely as humanly possible to the inspired meaning. The Holy Spirit reveals general truths about God; the student, convicted of these general truths, applies hermeneutic principles to arrive at the proper meaning of specific passages.

## **Schools of Biblical Interpretation**

Through the centuries, people have recognized the value in using principles for interpretation. But, humans being the way we are, have developed a number of different principles and methodologies. Here's a brief summary of the more popular hermeneutic "schools:"

**The Allegorical Schools of Interpretation** This method of interpretation developed among the Hellenized Jews and Christians who were strongly influenced by Clement of Alexandria and Origen two of the early church "fathers" who viewed Scripture, particularly the Old Testament, as being symbolic rather than literal. The allegorical school teaches that beneath each verse of scripture (beneath the obvious) is the "real" meaning of the passage. Hidden in each sentence or statement is a symbolic spiritual meaning.

**The Devotional Schools of Interpretation** The devotional schools emphasize the edifying aspects of the scriptures and their interpretation, with the goal of developing one's spiritual life.

This method often advocated the reading of the scriptures as a means of obtaining a mystical experience. The Bible is said to be useful for devotion and prayer, but need not be studied. Critics of the devotional school argue that while the Bible is uniquely able to spiritually edify and is the primary means by which God conforms us to the image of His Son, this school's methodology can lead to an interpretation which has little to do with the truth of Scripture.

**The Liberal Schools of Interpretation** Theological liberalism is prevalent today. Liberal theologians do not accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and reject the verbal inspiration of the Bible.

**The Literal Schools of Interpretation** The literal method of interpreting the Bible is to accept the literal rendering of each sentence unless by virtue of the nature of the sentence or phrase or a clause within the sentence renders it impossible. For instance, figures of speech or fables of allegories do not admit to being of a literal interpretation.

## **History of Literal Interpretation**

The spirit of literal interpretation is that we should be satisfied with the literal interpretation of a text unless very substantial reasons can be given for advancing beyond the literal meaning.

When the New Testament writers refer to the Old Testament scriptures, they interpret those passages literally.

The writings of the earliest Church Fathers (Ignatius of Antioch, Ireneaus, and Justin Martyr) indicate that they took Scripture literally, unless the context clearly militated against it.

Thus, we have Biblical and extra-Biblical evidence that in the earliest days of Christianity, a literal interpretation of Scripture was displayed.

*In case you haven't guessed, this is only school of interpretation that I believe has a Biblical basis, and as such, it is the foundation of the hermeneutical principles I attempt to follow in my own study of God's Word.*

## **The 10 Principles of Biblical Interpretation**

There are certain principles that will help us to accurately handle the Word of Truth. These principles are embedded in the scripture itself. The Bible interprets itself (scripture interprets scripture).

### **Principle #1: The Literal Interpretation Principle**

We take the Bible at face value. This is a common sense approach. Even symbols and allegories in the Bible are based on the literal meaning of the scripture; thus the literal meaning is foundational to any symbolic or allegorical meaning.

*The golden rule of interpretation is: "When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense." Therefore, take every word at its primary, usual, meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise.*

### **Principle #2: The Contextual Principle**

A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text." By "proof text," of course, it means the abuse of a single verse or phrase taken out of context to "prove" a particular view. The word "text" is derived from the Latin word, which means to "weave."

The context is that which accompanies the text. The Word of God is a perfect unit. The scriptures cannot be broken; they all hang together, a perfect unity. We must look and consider the verses immediately before, after, and around the passage. We must consider the book of the Bible and the section of the Bible in which the passage occurs. The Bible must be interpreted within the framework of the Bible.

### **Principle #3: The Scripture Interprets Scripture Principle**

We may rest assured that God did not reveal an important doctrine in a single, ambiguous passage. All essential doctrines are fully and clearly explained - either in the immediate context, or somewhere else in the Bible.

*Rule of Thumb:* (If Jesus taught it the Gospels, if it seemed to be a part of church practice in the book of Acts, and the Apostles set it forth as sound doctrine in the Epistles, then it can be accepted.)

### **Principle #4: The Progressive Revelation Principle**

The Word of God is to be understood from the Old Testament to the New Testament as an unfolding revelation. God initiated revelation, but He did not reveal His truths all at one time. It was a long and progressive process. Therefore, "The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed."

### **Principle #5: The Accommodation Principle**

The Bible is to be interpreted in view of the fact that it is an accommodation of Divine truths to human minds: God the infinite communicating with man the finite. The Bible was written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Bible was also created in space, in time, and in history so that man could understand it. We must be careful, then, not to push accommodating language about God and His nature to literal extremes.

(Anthropomorphic)

### **Principle #6: The One Interpretation Principle**

Every verse in the Bible has only one interpretation, although that verse may have many applications. The one correct interpretation is that which mirrors the intent of the inspired author.

### **Principle #7: The Harmony of Scripture Principle**

No part of the Bible may be interpreted so as to contradict another part of the Bible. The Christian presupposes the inerrancy and harmony of Scripture as a necessary result of a perfect God revealing Himself perfectly to Mankind. Proper application of hermeneutical principles will resolve apparent conflicts.

### **Principle #8: The Genre Principle**

Genre is a literary term having to do with the category of literature under consideration. Proper interpretation must take the general literary category of any given passage into consideration. Are we dealing with poetry, history or prophecy? It is important that when we interpret the Word of God, we understand as much as possible the author's intent.

**Here are some books of the Bible and their respective Genres:**

Psalms - Poetry

Proverbs - Wise Sayings

Isaiah - History and Prophecy

The Gospels - Biography and History

The Epistles - Teaching and Doctrine

Revelation - Eschatology and Prophecy

**Principle #9: The Grammatical Principle**

The Bible was originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. While we have several highly accurate translations of the Bible in English, all translation involves a certain amount of interpretation on the part of the translator.

Thus, the study of word meanings, grammar, and syntax of the original languages is important for a proper understanding of Scripture. This doesn't mean that every student of the Bible must learn Hebrew or Greek.

here are a number of tools available - lexicons, Bible dictionaries, detailed exegetical commentaries - that can provide a deeper understanding of crucial passages.

**Principle #10: The Historical Background Principle**

The Bible was composed in a specific culture at a particular point in time. While it is universal in application, the truths in the Bible can most fully be realized when taking the surrounding culture and history into account.

### **The Grammatico -Historical Method**

This exegetical method of interpretation focuses attention not only on literary forms but upon grammatical constructions and historical contexts out of which the Scriptures were written. It is solidly in the "*literal school*" of Biblical interpretation, and is the hermeneutical methodology embraced by virtually all evangelical Exegetes and Scholars. It embraces each of the ten principles enumerated above.

### **Conclusion:**

Interpretation of Scripture will never be an exact science. The beliefs we bring to the text - our theological presuppositions - will inevitably color our interpretation to some degree. We can never eliminate our presuppositions nor should we, if they are Scripturally sound, but we can "test all things" - including our interpretations - and "hold to what is good.

**(1 Thessalonians 5:21 ).**